

## [Charles Kerr]

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1 Conn. 1938-9 Kerr

Mr. Charles Kerr, on whom I intend to call this afternoon, is not at home, and I take the upper road leading from the village of Reynolds Bridge to the main highway. About halfway along I meet an old gentleman, neatly dressed and wearing a slouch hat with the crown pulled to its highest possible peak somewhat in the fashion of a sombrero, who hails me in this manner:

“Hi, neighbor, can you tell me if August Koegel is still alive?” Having seen Mr. Koegel within the past five minutes unquestionably alive and well, I am able to answer in the affirmative and under the impression that the old gentleman in a native son returned to look up friends and neighbors I ask him if he has been away from the village long. “Hell, no,” he says, “Hain't been away for any length of time for the past twenty years. But I hain't seen August around lately.”

Further questioning elicits the information that the old fellow worked for a number of years at the knife factory, that he holds knifemakers in toto in very low esteem, that he worked for most of his adult life in the oil fields of Pennsylvania and that women are “hell on wheels.” His monologue becomes rambling and disjointed at times, requiring gentle prodding to get him back onto pertinent subjects, and he has a habit of executing a stiff legged jig step to lend emphasis to what he considers a particularly telling point. Says he:

“I'm a goddamn mongrel, that's what I am. Guess I'm mostly Dutch, with a touch of Yankee. My father was high Dutch and my mother was low Dutch—there's high Dutch and low Dutch. That makes me a goddamn mongrel, don't it? Spent the first part of 2 my life a-workin' in saw mills. Then my brother-in-law he says I'm a-goin' to make a rigger outa you, Gene. And he got me a job on a lease where he worked. Twenty eight years I put in on

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two leases. Made plenty of money. Then I come up here and went to work firin' in the mill. Sorry I did. Then I went in the knife shop. Knifemakers? Hell, yes, I knew plenty of 'em.

"Lowest goddamn, swinish, low-livin' people on earth them Sheffield knifemakers. Suckin' booze and beer day in and day out, the men and the women too. Know what they used to call Sheffield? The sink-hole of England, that's what Sheffield was. My own daughter married Frank Platts. His father was one of 'em and Frank he had that no good lazy streak in him too. She went to work teach n' school and kept him for five years. Know what I'd've done? I'd've told him git to hell out and work or starve. He's workin' now, though. I never had no woman work for me in my life. What I brought in I give to the wife and she spent, and what I didn't bring in she didn't spend, and we got along fine.

"Them kids of Frank White's. He used to send 'em to work in the knife shop and stay home himself. Meet 'em on payday and take away their money and spend it on booze, that's the kind of people them knifemakers was, some of them.

"Then they got to makin' stock, too much stock. Shelves full of it. If I was in business I'd make what I could sell and no more, ain't that the way? Frost got hold of the shop 3 and all he thought about was women. Him and his two brothers got left a hundred and fifty thousand each, down in New York, and he bought out the knife shop, but he never tended to business. Went over to France and got runnin' around with the French women and brought one back with him, and his wife sued him and they straightened it out and he was all right for a while, then he said he could live cheaper in France than he could here, and he let the business go to hell again and went over and got another Frenchwoman. Then they got the accountants up here, lookin' into the business, and they took it away from him. I think him and his wife got together again last I heard they was livin' together.

"Women was his downfall. That's all they do, by God, is tantalize a man from Hell to breakfast. Tells you right in the Good Book, that Eve put the devil in Cain to murder Abel. There's all kinds of ways of lookin' at things you read in the Book. You don't want to

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believe everything the preachers tell you. Never see one of them yet do a days' work. And don't the Book say 'man shall live by the sweat of his brow?'

"That's the way I lived, by God, by the sweat of my brow. Maybe I wa'n't always smart, maybe I ought to have thousands where I only got dollars, but I ain't broke yet, by God. Foreman down on the lease used to say to me, 'Gene, you've got more money than I have and I be damned if I see how you do it.' I says, 'Jack, you don't see me around here Monday mornings throwin' up and sick and foggy, do you?' And he says, 'No, I 4 don't.' And I says, 'I don't spend the week [end?] sittin' in some smoky saloon suckin' liquor and cigars.

"The big Mucky Muck come along in his car one day and he sent me in after Jack, says he wanted to have a word with him. Jack says I wonder what the hell I done now that I'm going to get bawled out for. And he went out and the Big Gun talked nice to him, asked him how things were goin', and gave him a cigar and everything. But when he left, he says: 'remember, Jack, a man that everybody likes is no damn good to the Tidewater Oil Company.' Jack come back and told me, and he says, 'What the hell do you make of that?'

"I never said anything. I never told anybody anything. Got along better that way. They set me to cuttin' nipples one time. I found out how to thread 'em so that the head wouldn't flatten down and they wouldn't leak. Used to make 'em when nobody else was around. One of the pumpers says to me 'How the hell is it your nipples leak just like ours when we watch you make 'em, but the ones you make when nobody's around are perfect? I never told him. Let 'em find out themselves. I kept gettin' better jobs, finally they made me a pumper. Worked five wells the first year. But I always had my own way of doin' things. I used to take a piece of hemp and wind it around a stick and dip it in oil and light it, then light the gas. The boss came around one day and saw me do it. He says, 'Gene that ain't no way to light the gas.' He turned it on and lit a match and stuck it in there and it lighted.

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I says, 'Jack, you do it your way and I'll do it mine.' One day I come in and there he was with his eyebrows burnt off and his mustache and part of his hair. That damn gas had blowed him clear back against the wall, lucky it didn't kill him.

"We got along all right till he put his kid to work for me. Unloadin' rods. Damndest lazy kid I ever see. He couldn't even unload 'em without droppin' 'em all over. So I told him to go home. Jack called me down to the office and told me, he says, 'you sent my kid home, and now I'm sendin' you home.' I didn't say nothin', just took my tools and went. But when they heard about it at the main office, they called Jack in and they says, 'you sent Neff home, and now we're sendin' you home.' They wanted me to come back, but I had a job on another lease already.

"Twenty eight years I worked at it, and always made good money. And then like a damn fool I come up here and went to work in the knife shop."